

First record of Asiatic Dowitcher *Limnodromus semipalmatus* for Africa

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Première mention du Bécassin d'Asie *Limnodromus semipalmatus* pour l'Afrique. Un Bécassin d'Asie *Limnodromus semipalmatus* a été découvert près de Leeupan, à Benoni, en lisière de Johannesburg, Afrique du Sud, le 11 novembre 2004. Ceci constitue la première donnée pour l'Afrique, l'unique mention précédente, de novembre 1966 au Kenya, ayant été réexaminée et rejetée par le Comité d'Homologation Est Africain. Ce migrateur paléarctique, qui est considéré comme Quasi-menacé, niche en Sibérie, en Mongolie et au nord-est de la Chine, et hiverne de l'Inde de l'est et l'Asie du sud-est jusqu'en Australie. L'oiseau observé en Afrique du Sud est resté dans les environs de Leeupan jusqu'au 1er décembre et a été vu par près d'un millier d'ornithologues.

Richard Montinaro and I had been viewing waders around Leeupan, in Benoni, on the edge of Johannesburg, South Africa, on a weekly basis since early-September 2004. On 11 November, at midday, we spotted a large wader, feeding close to some Ruff *Philomachus pugnax*, which we initially identified as a Bar-tailed Godwit *Limosa lapponica*, although it possessed a strange sewing machine-like feeding action, with rapid vertical probing. The following day, having consulted *Shorebirds* (Hayman *et al.* 1986), we returned to Leeupan at midday and found the bird busily feeding in almost the same place. Now equipped with the knowledge that godwits never have an all-black bill, it was clear that the bird was a dowitcher, but which, Long-billed *Limnodromus scolopaceus* or Asiatic *L. semipalmatus*? Two phone calls were made, to Trevor Hardaker in Cape Town and Paul Wood in the UK. By now 95% convinced that we had found an Asiatic Dowitcher, we sent our photos to Trevor Hardaker, who placed them on the bird-net information service. Within an hour, both Richard's and my own cell phones were ringing non-stop. Birders started to arrive at Leeupan the same afternoon and next day, a Saturday, some came from as far afield as Cape Town.

This was the start of one of the biggest twitches South Africa has known. The bird was seen daily until 19th, but disappeared next day. On the 21st the bird was resighted at Glenshaft Pan, in Actonville, c.1 km from Leeupan. From then until 1 December the dowitcher fed at one or other of the two pans and was seen by c.1,000 birdwatchers over the course of its stay.

Description and identification

The bird had overall greyish-brown upperparts, a long, straight all-black bill with a heavy base and blunt tip (swollen laterally on the upper mandible), prominent white supercilia meeting at the bill base leaving a dark cap, a dark loreal stripe and long dark legs. The underparts were white with greyish-brown mottling on the breast and grey-brown barring on the flanks. In flight, there was a pale band across the secondaries and inner primaries, the rump was whitish contrasting only slightly with the pale grey-brown tail and, in close views, the outer tail feathers appeared barred. When feeding, it had a distinctive sewing-machine action, often coming up with food in its bill, making the latter appear heavier.

On the basis of this combination of features the bird was identified as an adult Asiatic Dowitcher in winter plumage. Bar-tailed Godwit closely resembles Asiatic Dowitcher, but is larger, has a slightly upturned, two-toned bill, a contrasting white wedge on the back and a different feeding action. Long-billed Dowitcher is considerably smaller, with shorter, green or yellowish-green legs and in flight a narrow white patch on the back and a sharper, whiter trailing edge to the wing (Hayman *et al.* 1986)

Asiatic (or Asian) Dowitcher breeds in steppe regions in Siberia, south into Mongolia and north-east China. It winters from east India through south-east Asia, south-east Sumatra and Java to north Australia, where it occurs in sheltered coastal environments (van Gils & Wiersma 1996). It is currently listed as Near Threatened, with a



Figures 1–2. Asiatic Dowitcher / Bécassin d'Asie *Limnodromus semipalmatus*, Leeupan, Benoni, November 2004 (Clive Kaplin)

population estimated at c.20,000 birds (BirdLife International 2000, 2004). The only previous report in Africa, a sight record from Lake Nakuru, Kenya, in November 1966 (Smart & Forbes-Watson 1971), cited in many authoritative sources (e.g. Urban *et al.* 1986), was re-evaluated and rejected by the East African Rarities Committee (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). The only accepted dowitcher records on the African continent refer to the Nearctic Long-billed Dowitcher, of which a few sightings have been reported in Morocco (Thévenot *et al.* 2003).

The likelihood of Asiatic Dowitcher appearing in southern Africa, especially at a locality 600 km inland, seemed very low. In recent years other new waders have been found in southern Africa, the Great Knot *Calidris tenuirostris* at West Coast National Park in March 2002 (Cohen & Winter 2003) and Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* in Zimbabwe in January 2002 (Demey 2002), but both of these were predicted vagrants to the region, whereas the Asiatic Dowitcher came as a complete surprise.

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